

Montana House of Representatives

Witness Statement

EXHIBIT 10
DATE Feb. 6, 2013
HB HB 9

JOINT ASC - LONG-RANGE PLANNING

PLEASE PRINT

NAME: RANDAL E MORGER

BUDGET: _____

PO Box 385
ADDRESS: FORT BENTON MT 59442

DATE: _____

WHOM DO YOU REPRESENT? River & Plains Society - MONTANA Agricultural Center

SUPPORT: _____ OPPOSE: _____ AMEND: X

COMMENTS:

Requesting an amendment to HB 9 to
provide the MONTANA Agricultural Center w/
\$12,000 (twelve thousand) in operational funding
in the FY 14-15 biennium.

(Rob Cook noted he would officially enter)

Testimony of Randy Morger, River and Plains Society board member, Fort Benton, MT, Requesting O&M Funding for the Society's Montana Agricultural Center, before the Long Range Planning Committee, 63d Legislative Assembly, Helena, Wednesday, Feb 6, 2013

Mister Chairman, distinguished committee members, my name is Randy Morger from Fort Benton. I'm a board member of the River and Plains Society which operates Fort Benton's museums, historic research center and library, and Chouteau County's largest meeting place. Later this month, I will become the Society's executive director, succeeding Jack Lepley who is retiring from that position.

My testimony is different from most others today. That's because our request to help fund Operations and Maintenance expenses for the Society's Montana Agricultural Center was NOT recommended for funding by the Cultural and Aesthetics Advisory Committee.

Their decision was based on our incomplete proposal, which did not fully address the scale or impact of our facilities and mission. In slim defense of our grant writer, who has been forwarding these requests successfully for many years, I would tell you that she truncated this biennium's request with all good intentions, believing that the committee's prior knowledge of the Ag Center's many good works and strong reputation allowed her to scale back our written justification.

That was a major error on our part. As the committee wrote in its evaluation, "This is a venerable institution but...there was not enough information provided...to get a full picture" of our operations. They added that grants are judged by what is written, not a reputation or what is personally known about an organization.

On the bright side, the committee stated it was impressed with our broad funding resources and admissions income, but overall our narrative was graded below other worthy organizations that were recommended for funding.

As the incoming executive director, that's a hard lesson learned that I assure you I've fully taken to heart, and I can guarantee in future bienniums it will not happen again.

Still, I wanted to personally let you know that our non-profit board fully understands the Cultural and Aesthetics Advisory Committee's decision and its important and difficult tasks in the face of limited resources. And we also acknowledge this legislative committee's critical role in keeping Montana's cultural heritage, arts and history alive for our citizens. Finally, I appear on behalf of the River and Plains Society to seek a one-time exception.

I ask for your favorable consideration of \$12,000 in funding to support the Montana Agricultural Center -- \$6,000 annually over the next two years. I put forward this humble request because, regardless of the one-time inadequacy of our paperwork, these facts remain:

The Montana Agricultural Center in Fort Benton -- encompassing its Museum of the Northern Great Plains, Schwinden Library and Overholser Research Center, Hornaday Gallery and Homestead Village -- is our state's official Agricultural Museum, as declared by the 50th Legislature in 1989.

With the exception of these cultural grant requests, we have never asked for additional financial support from the state – or for that matter, from the local or Chouteau County government – to maintain its operations.

Those operations are significant, far-reaching and beneficial to many Montanans. For example, along with some 2,500 paying tourists who stopped through Fort Benton's museums last summer, we hosted more than 700 additional school children on tours emphasizing the region's importance to the Montana frontier and homestead eras. 8,000 more people -- county, state and beyond-- used our facilities for important conferences and social gatherings.

Our annual O&M budget – the cost for keeping the lights on and doors open – is about \$140 thousand a year, more than half of which goes to 10 part time employees who staff the museums and keep up our historical structures. A \$6,000 O&M grant by the legislature would equate to a little over 4% contribution toward our operating costs. But that minor amount means a great deal:

For the River and Plains Society, it's important because while Fort Benton is off the beaten path, visitors to our historical attractions boost the town's economy and our services strengthen the vitality of our town. This funding is vital to broaden our financial viability.

For this committee and the legislature, it is concrete testimony of your support for your state-level agricultural museum and heritage complex, and your efforts to sustain the culture of rural Montana.

Let me emphasize that the River and Plains Society is NOT asking that this \$12,000 plus-up be funded to the detriment of any of the other fine organizations already recommended for funding. Rather it's our understanding that better than expected investment returns has led to a higher ending fund balance, and we would look to that as the source.

A couple of years ago, I was privileged to escort a prominent national consultant on tourism through our Ag Museum. Jonathon Tourtellot, the National Geographic director who coined the phrase geo-tourism, was preparing for his keynote speech later that week at the Montana Tourism Conference. And as we toured the Ag Center, he became visibly excited and exclaimed: "Do people in your state realize what a gem this place is?"

Well, we do realize it. And whether or not you approve additional funding, I warmly invite you to come visit Fort Benton – your state agricultural center and Museum of the Northern Great Plains. On behalf of the River and Plains Society, thank you for the courtesy of your time and attention today.